



JESUS



God

Bible

World

Jesus

Faith

BC is a series of five studies that parallel a faith journey toward Jesus Christ. Each builds on the one before, and interested readers will find themselves somewhere on the path.

This fourth study assumes the existence of God, the relevance of the Bible, and what it says about why the world is broken, and explores how Jesus Christ is restoring God's original design.

Jesus

Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God." (John 6:68-69)

Jesus Christ is unique. No single individual has had a more profound effect upon humanity. Millions of people have believed him to be the divine Creator dwelling in human flesh, able to reconcile mankind with God. These believers have included people of all kinds, from slaves to heads of state, from serfs and laborers to artists and great scientists. No other figure has proven so compelling to people of every race, nationality, language, age and century. While his followers have often been divided and divisive, Jesus himself is a man not only for all seasons but all cultures and all times. As the third millennia since his initial work begins, his followers continue to multiply all over the world.

Jesus' uniqueness, however, goes back much further than the 2,000 years since his birth. All that Jesus Christ means today builds on a foundation going back to the beginning of human life on this planet.

When opening the Scriptures to study their record of Christ, it is common for people to turn to the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. But these narratives of Jesus' life and work are the climax of an epic history stretching back to the beginning of all things human. It is in that story, called the Old Testament, that we find the threads which come together in Jesus. The New Testament bonds to the Old like Velcro; the fibers of each were designed to hook into the other. It is as if all the biblical authors over all the centuries were guided by one Author intent on telling one grand story, a story that

stretches from a final climactic vision of the future all the way back to the prophecy that started it all ...

The Promise

The beginning of Genesis is an outline of the entire Bible to come. Its first three chapters describe the origin of the human race, its purpose, tragedy and hope of redemption.¹

To summarize this introduction: God created humanity with a purpose. The first pair were called to give birth to a vast family exercising responsible dominion, guided by a conscience that glorifies God's character, intelligence, artistic skill and revealed will. Instead, they set a very different course for their posterity, heeding the seductive suggestion to grab for control independently from God. Living apart from God is what the Bible calls sin. Human sin resulted in a just but terrible divine punishment. God has largely left humanity to its own devices until the full intended number of human beings shall be born. Even this taste of judgment, this passive separation from the true and living God, has resulted in the general decay of human life—our health, emotional and social stability, and control of the planet. Ultimately, death will become an active judgment in the everlasting isolation of Hell.

Having initially explained why death dominates our experience today, the rest of the Bible traces a plan of reconciliation (life) set in motion by the very first prophecy.

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and
between your offspring and her offspring; he shall
bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.
(Genesis 3:15)

This prophecy was spoken by God to the serpent, the diabolical figure whose temptation brought us to ruin. But although it is phrased as a curse upon the Devil, it is primarily a gracious promise

of deliverance from the sin and death into which Adam and Eve's children were plummeted

"And I will put enmity between you and the woman." Since God is addressing the serpent at this point, "you" refers to the Devil, while "the woman" must refer to Eve (there was no other woman at the time!). Here is a bold proclamation of sovereign divine grace. Eve freely chose the Devil's way over God's. God vows to move Eve's soul so that she will change her mind and reject the Devil, freely returning her allegiance to the Lord. This prophecy decrees a profound change of heart. God promised not only to reverse sin's consequence (death), but to inspire Eve to reject the sinful choices which brought death upon us. Part of Satan's punishment will be to see Eve learn to hate him and all he stands for, seeking her Creator's love once again.

"... and between your offspring and hers." This profound change of heart, this reconciliation with God, will extend far beyond Eve. The prophecy contemplates two lines of "offspring," or future generations. One is associated with Satan and the other with Eve. The Devil, of course, does not have babies. Rather, the Bible refers to people who follow the Devil as his "children."² Part of humanity, therefore, will persist in following Satan's sinful lead. The "offspring of the woman" must, in contrast, refer to those in future generations who, like Eve, experience an inner transformation, repent of sin (change their mind about it), and find reconciliation with God.

This one verse provides the interpretive key to the entire Old Testament. The Bible sees all of human history as a working out of God's promise of reconciliation—a promise that God will reconcile himself with a group of people drawn from the larger human family. Before the Bible's story is finished, this family will include every ethnic flavor of mankind, so that being "born" into this

family is not a matter of genetics, but rather a matter of personal faith.

Starting in the following chapter, the Bible traces two distinct streams of mankind, the larger one striving for control over the world and each other, the smaller one embracing faith in the prophecy of God's blessing. Throughout the Old Testament, the redemptive stream is represented by a single genealogical line. Abel trusts in God, not Cain. Seth replaces Abel, and the line starts again. This "covenant line" is traced down to Noah, where again, it starts over. The line continues with Isaac, not Ishmael, and Jacob, not Esau. God's choices do not mark out the best people, but rather those commissioned with carrying on the message of God's promise. Wherever there is a genealogical fork in the road, the text always makes clear which descendent is the "woman's offspring" who carries on God's message of reconciliation.

Genesis and the rest of the Bible include many fascinating stories. They are, however, more than an anthology of ethnic literature. They are tied together over many centuries by a single purpose. The Old Testament was written to trace the adventures and the survival of one particular family line, the line associated with God's original promise of salvation.

"he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." The prophecy of Genesis 3:15 ends with a dramatic twist. Suddenly, "the offspring of the woman" are all represented by a masculine singular, "he." Eventually, one specific individual represents everyone who will ever be reconciled to God. Apparently, reconciliation with God is something that must be accomplished by somebody in particular. This special somebody will single-handedly destroy the Devil's influence through a victory that comes at great personal cost. He must, as it were, brave deadly venom to accomplish his victory.

The oldest biblical prophecy on record, then, is a promise of life, a promise of reconciliation with God, accomplished by one specific

man willing to embrace deadly peril. While each generation will continue in our first parents' sinful ways, God will act in one genealogical line to regularly restate this vow to save those who trust him with a renewed heart.

That is the promise. Further explaining it, exploring it and illustrating it is the unifying theme of the Old Testament.

The Promise Unfolds

Beginning in Chapter 12, this story becomes part of the common written history of humanity, including people and events also mentioned outside of the Bible.

This epic story of one family eventually expands into the chronicle of the family-nation of Israel. Unlike most other histories, however, the point of the narrative is never to show how wonderful these people are (with all respect, they are as disappointing as the rest of us). The point is rather to show how God progressively revealed to them more and more about himself, and the coming one who would sacrifice himself to reconcile many with God.

The Lord used this family-nation as a brush on the canvas of history to paint a lavish and colorful picture of the coming Savior and his work.³ Scattered throughout Old Testament history are repeated historical models of this Champion and his victory. There is Noah and the ark, in which one faithful person brings humanity through God's righteous judgment. There is the covenant with Abraham, in which God vows to personally stand in a pool of his own blood in order to fulfill his promises. There is Moses, a servant who delivers God's chosen people from slavery to a Promised Land through a Passover sacrifice. There are a series of Judges who single-handedly achieve victory and deliverance on behalf of their people. There is King David, the shepherd who establishes a kingdom to glorify God. In addition to these standout individual

models, God also provided Israel with prophets and with a carefully crafted priestly system in the Temple.

Even the architecture of the Temple illustrated how the coming representative of the woman's seed would reconcile humanity to God.⁴ Its structural design described how the Lord could be approached only by a single High Priest who offered a perfect substitutionary sacrifice to satisfy God's just wrath against human sin. That way, God's holiness could be honored even as sinners were forgiven. Again, the divine source of all these models was established through miraculous signs—often including the astounding prediction of future events.

The most striking predictions of all were those that directly spoke of the Champion himself. He was prophesied to be God on earth, a divine shepherd who would come to care for his flock.⁵ It was foretold that he would be born in Bethlehem⁶ and would teach in Israel's northern area, Galilee.⁷ He would preach the Word of God,⁸ enter Jerusalem on a donkey's colt,⁹ and suffer so as to literally bear the sins of many.¹⁰ Ultimately, he would reign as King over God's eternal kingdom,¹¹ and thus fulfill all that the Old Testament prophets, priests and kings modeled. Because each of those Hebrew officers were set apart by anointing, the promised Champion was called the anointed one—"Messiah" in Hebrew, "Christ" when the word was translated into Greek.

Through the laws and customs God gave Israel and through the way he shaped their history, the cryptic promise of Genesis 3:15 was filled out in great detail. And all the while, the genealogy went on, link by link, toward its climax in the Champion of the "woman's seed."¹²

However, while the Old Testament ends with its genealogy intact, it is unfinished. A picture of the promised Christ had been drawn, but he himself had yet to appear.

The Promise Fulfilled

The New Testament makes its principal point in its very first chapter, where Matthew declares the great genealogy to be complete.¹³ Consider the significance of this rather amazing fact: Jesus Christ is the only historical person who has a genealogy going back to the beginning of the human race!¹⁴ Everyone must have such an ancestry, of course. The point is that only Christ's has been recorded, and recorded specifically as a fulfillment of God's promise of salvation. No other religious figure, no other human being for that matter, can make such a claim. If God did, indeed, originally promise to overcome the human tragedy of sin and death, that Savior simply *has* to be Jesus Christ. But how do we know that this story of a fulfilled promise is any more than just a story?

Jesus was vindicated the same way God vindicated those who prepared for his arrival, through miracles. His very birth was a miracle, surprisingly fulfilling his role as "the woman's seed."

It is important to appreciate the purpose of miracles. Contrary to popular thinking, biblical miracles were not performed to stimulate faith.¹⁵ Neither were they supposed to be a normal way of life for those who believe. Miracles were highly abnormal events which provided an objective basis for recognizing divine revelation. Miracles were unusual and dramatic "attesting signs" which demonstrated the authenticity of God's prophets.¹⁶ With the final prophetic work of Jesus' apostles, the need for such signs has passed.¹⁷

Jesus' miracles take on a whole new dimension when they are understood as linking him with the Old Testament promise. Jesus did not heal, or multiply loaves, or raise the dead just because they were neat things to do. Each miracle intelligently identified him with an Old Testament theme or a figure that modeled him. They underscored that he was the one prophesied to fulfill God's ancient

promise of reconciliation. He was, in fact, God incarnate (in human flesh), come to fulfill his promise personally.¹⁸

The miracles pointed to Jesus' authenticity, and his teaching illuminated the Old Testament's meaning. But none of that actually overcame the alienation that severed us from God and condemned us to death. That happened at the cross and the empty tomb.

Although guilty of no crime, Christ's cross was a judicial execution, a condemnation by both Jews and Gentiles together. The Bible discloses, however, that it was much more than that. As a fulfillment of God's promise to reconcile a people to himself, God took human form in the person of Jesus and willingly accepted the condemnation of crucifixion.¹⁹ Although personally sinless, on the cross God-in-the-flesh took upon himself the kind of condemnation justly deserved by humanity. As a human being, God became a substitute for all the "woman's seed," bearing the deadly venom of the divine judgment they deserved.²⁰ Thus, a way was made for God to reconcile sinners to himself, and still remain a righteous God who will not tolerate sin.²¹

Jesus' work did not end with the cross, however. On the third day after his death, he rose again. In his resurrection, Christ vindicated the effectiveness of the cross²² and personally inaugurated a new humanity reconciled with the Creator.²³ With the just condemnation of sin vicariously accomplished, the way was open to begin healing souls—souls of people now reconciled to God through faith in Christ.

This new humanity continues to multiply through the sharing of faith so that "the woman's offspring" increasingly includes people of every possible ethnic background.²⁴ The world history we all learn in history books, while important in itself, is also a backdrop for the outworking of this great redemption around the world, as the risen Jesus calls person after person to be "reborn" by faith into God's family. When this family of faith is complete to

God's satisfaction, the Bible states that Jesus will return to end this phase of history, and move mankind forward into its eternal destiny.

The Promise Considered

What a story, and one that claims to be entirely true!²⁵ Christianity rests this claim on actual history, most especially on the historical event of Christ's cross and resurrection.²⁶ The story of Christ is not a fiction concocted to make us feel better, but the truth of what God is actually accomplishing in time and space.

The last booklet in this series will go on to address the issue of faith and what faith involves. This discussion comes now to a close with the simple observation that Jesus Christ is worthy of our serious scrutiny.

Why? Because the Old Testament deals with the broken condition of our world like no other book. It reveals the basis for both human significance and human pain, along with a Living God who is doing something to save us.

Ultimately, the Old Testament is the story of Jesus. The initial prophecy that gave the Old Testament its form and purpose could only be fulfilled by one individual—not Moses, not Mohammed—but Jesus Christ. He was the last link in the carefully preserved genealogical chain of the “woman's offspring,” the *only* possible candidate to fulfill God's ancient promise of redemption. He alone did what needed to be done to overcome the barrier of guilt and moral failure that would otherwise forever separate us from a holy God. He alone conquered death. In him, our alienation from God can end and real life can begin.

There is good, intelligent reason to pursue faith in Christ.

Of course, there are plenty of other options if all we want is a religion to comfort us. If “God” is merely a creation of our own

minds or culture, then it doesn't really matter what philosophy we hang on the wall while we wait to die and be forgotten.

Jesus Christ uniquely represents the alternative. His is the story of a Creator who invested us with purpose. When humanity rejected that purpose, God personally stepped in to offer us a way back.

It's true that biblical faith is hard to swallow. It requires death to the way of thinking and living we are used to. It requires hope in a God who has every reason to condemn us. It requires faith that our Creator would step into our skin to absorb his own wrath against us, so that we might be spared.

Jesus' first disciples realized that God's promise is hard to believe. But they also understood the lack of any other reasonable option. When many went off to look for other alternatives, Jesus asked them if they wanted to leave, too. Peter's answer says it all ...

"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God."
(John 6:68-69)

As challenging as this story sounds, Jesus Christ remains the *only* rational hope the world has ever known.

If this makes sense, then the only question left is what faith in Christ would mean for me? How can I become part of Christ's story?

The last pamphlet in this series is entitled "Faith" and explores what it means to personally believe and follow Jesus Christ.

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- ¹ These themes are explored in greater depth in a companion booklet entitled, *World*.
- ² John 8:42-44.
- ³ Luke 24:36-47; 1 Corinthians 10:1-11; 1 Peter 1:10-12.
- ⁴ The key element of the Tabernacle/Temple was its “pattern,” cf. Exodus 25:9,40. A good place to begin studying the significance of this pattern is Hebrews 8-10.
- ⁵ Psalm 23; Ezekiel 34 (John 10:1-18).
- ⁶ Micah 5:2 (cf. Matthew 2:1-6).
- ⁷ Isaiah 9:1-7 (Matthew 4:13-16).
- ⁸ Isaiah 11:1-5; 61:1-3 (cf. Luke 4:14-21)
- ⁹ Zechariah 9:9 (cf. John 12:12-16).
- ¹⁰ Isaiah 53; also Psalm 22 (Acts 8:26-35; 1 Peter 2:21-25).
- ¹¹ 2 Samuel 7; Psalm 2 (Acts 4:23-31; Hebrews 1:1-5).
- ¹² Analysis of Old Testament patterns make it clear that its genealogies are recorded in compressed form. That is, “X was the son of Y” might well mean that X was the great grandson of Y. The point was to representatively connect a complete genealogy. As a result, the total timeline represented may go back 10,000 years or more.
- ¹³ The Gospel of Matthew was written largely for a Jewish audience, and so concentrates on the genealogy only back to Abraham. The Gospel of Luke completes the entire connection back to Adam (cf. Luke 3).
- ¹⁴ Biblical genealogies did not attempt to record every link, but encapsulate large chunks of time by simply connecting highlighted individuals in the chain. Hence, Jesus could be called “the son of David,” skipping a number of generations in between but still keeping the chain connected.
- ¹⁵ Jesus specifically renounced such a practice, Matthew 12:39; 16:4.
- ¹⁶ cf. Exodus 4:1-9 (and all the miracles to follow); 1 Kings 18:16-39; John 14:11 (especially the resurrection); 2 Corinthians 12:12. The

point of miracles is to give objective evidence that a speaker is from God. Such evidence, however, does not necessarily stimulate faith in the hearers. Faith is as much a moral issue as it is an intellectual one. Biblical miracles point the way to reconciliation with God; they do not make anyone desire the journey.

¹⁷ cf. Hebrews 1:1-3; Revelation 22:18-19. Please note that God still exercises sovereign power today as much as ever. There is simply no longer any need for dramatic flashes of the supernatural on command in order to highlight his spokesman. The message of Christ is complete and his resurrection is the ultimate attesting sign.

¹⁸ Isaiah 40:1-11; 59:9-20 (cf. Mark 1:1-4; John 1:1-18).

¹⁹ Philippians 2:5-11.

²⁰ Corinthians 5:19-21; 1 Peter 2:21-25 (cf. Isaiah 53).

²¹ Romans 3:21-26.

²² see again 1 Corinthians 15:12-58

²³ 2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 2.

²⁴ Revelation 5:9-10. The Bible is very clear that the people of God will be completely multi-ethnic, so as to demonstrate that our self-centered pride has nothing to do with our salvation, which is based entirely on God's grace and love.

²⁵ John 3:31-33; 18:37

²⁶ 1 Corinthians 15:1-19 ff.



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All Bible quotations are from the ESV®